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# Singing the Earth, Narrating Ecological Crisis: Eco-Poetics Language and Environmental Storytelling in Ojaide's *Songs of Myself* And Osundare's *Green: Sighs Of Our Ailing Planet*

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## Abstract

Recent ecocritical scholarship has moved beyond thematic representations of nature to interrogate the formal and narrative strategies through which literature produces ecological consciousness and registers environmental crisis. Situated within this critical turn, this paper examines the convergence of eco-poetics and eco-narratology in Tanure Ojaide's *Songs of Myself* and Niyi Osundare's *Green: Sighs of Our Ailing Planet*. It argues that both poets mobilise lyric voice, poetic form, and narrative positioning to construct environmentally responsive modes of storytelling that challenge anthropocentric assumptions and foreground human entanglement with the natural world. Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism and contemporary eco-narratological theory, the paper analyses how eco-poetic devices such as metaphor, rhythm, repetition, and apostrophe intersect with narratological elements including voice, focalisation, and temporal movement to frame ecological crisis as a lived, ethical, and collective experience. In *Songs of Myself*, Ojaide's lyric persona functions as an ecological witness whose selfhood is inseparable from endangered landscapes, unsettling rigid distinctions between subject and environment. Similarly, *Green: Sighs of Our Ailing Planet* deploys a polyphonic and morally charged poetic voice that narrates environmental degradation while inviting readers into a shared responsibility for planetary care. The paper contends that this fusion of eco-poetics and eco-narratology transforms poetry into a form of environmental storytelling in which aesthetic form becomes a vehicle for ecological critique and ethical engagement. By foregrounding Nigerian poetic responses to ecological crisis, the study challenges the dominance of Euro-American eco-critical paradigms and repositions African poetry as a vital contributor to global environmental humanities discourse in the Anthropocene.

**Keywords:** Eco-poetics, Eco-narratology, Environmental storytelling, Nigerian poetry, Ecological crisis

## Introduction

### The Humanities in an Age of Ecological Distress

The twenty-first century is increasingly defined by what scholars describe as a condition of global ecological distress — a convergence of climate change, biodiversity loss, toxic pollution, deforestation, extractive capitalism, and widening environmental inequality. What distinguishes this moment is not merely the scale of environmental degradation but its epistemological implications: ecological crisis is also a crisis of perception, representation, and ethical imagination. The naming of the present epoch as the Anthropocene signals not only geological transformation but also a profound reconfiguration of humanity's narrative relationship with the earth. As Lawrence Buell observes, environmental crisis is inseparable from "a crisis of imagination" (Buell 2), for

how societies narrate and aestheticise nature shapes how they treat it. Within this context, the Humanities assume renewed urgency, offering interpretative frameworks through which ecological questions may be ethically interrogated rather than merely scientifically quantified.

Recent ecocritical scholarship has moved beyond thematic readings of nature in literature to explore how formal narrative structures mediate environmental consciousness. Early ecocriticism, as Cheryll Glotfelty famously defined it, examined "the relationship between literature and physical environment" (xviii). While foundational, such approaches often privileged thematic presence over aesthetic strategy. Contemporary theorists have therefore redirected attention towards literary form, language, and narrative architecture. Hubert Zapf's concept of literature as "cultural ecology" foregrounds the regenerative and critical capacities of literary discourse within environmentally damaged cultures (Zapf 3). Similarly, eco-narratological studies, such as those advanced by Erin James, interrogate how narrative perspective, focalisation, and world-making shape readers' environmental perception (James 62). Together, eco-poetics and eco-narratology reveal that ecological meaning is not simply stated; it is structured, patterned, and narratively produced.

Yet much of this theoretical development remains anchored within Euro-American contexts. African literary responses to environmental crisis – particularly poetic ones – have not received equivalent narratological scrutiny, despite the continent's disproportionate exposure to extractive violence, oil exploitation, and climate vulnerability. Rob Nixon's notion of "slow violence" underscores how environmental harm unfolds gradually and invisibly, often within postcolonial spaces rendered marginal in global discourse (Nixon 2). Nigerian poetry, emerging from landscapes marked by oil spills, desertification, and political corruption, becomes a crucial site for examining how ecological trauma is lyricised and narrativised. To read such poetry solely through thematic ecocriticism risks overlooking the sophisticated aesthetic strategies through which environmental crisis is rendered intelligible and ethically urgent.

This paper therefore situates Tanure Ojaide's *Songs of Myself* (2015) and Niyi Osundare's *Green: Sighs of Our Ailing Planet* (2022) within the broader intellectual project of the Humanities in a time of planetary precarity. Both poets are centrally concerned with environmental degradation and communal survival, yet their ecological interventions operate not only at the level of subject matter but through distinctive poetic and narrative forms. Ojaide's lyric persona frequently inhabits endangered landscapes, collapsing the divide between self and environment and transforming the poetic "I" into an ecological witness. Osundare, by contrast, often adopts a polyphonic and ethically interpellative voice, crafting poems that function as communal addresses and moral indictments of environmental neglect. In both cases, poetic language becomes a mode of environmental storytelling.

In aligning with the fact that the Humanities must contribute to a deeper understanding of the Sustainable Development Goals and foster an ethical reassessment of ecological questions, this study argues that literary form is not peripheral to ecological discourse but constitutive of it. The Sustainable Development Goals articulated by the United Nations, particularly those concerning climate action and life on land, require not only policy

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frameworks but imaginative and ethical reorientation by reshaping narrative expectations, unsettling anthropocentric hierarchies, and modeling relational modes of being.

This paper contends that the convergence of eco-poetic language and eco-narratological structures in Ojaide's *Songs of Myself* and Osundare's *Green: Sighs of Our Ailing Planet* reconfigures poetry into a form of environmental storytelling that advances ethical ecological awareness within global environmental humanities discourse. By examining how metaphor, rhythm, focalisation, voice, and temporal movement construct ecological crisis as lived, collective, and morally charged experience, the study demonstrates that Nigerian poetry offers not merely representation but theoretical intervention. In an era of global ecological distress, the Humanities do not simply interpret crisis; they narrate it, aestheticise it, and thereby render it ethically imaginable.

## Theoretical Framework

### Eco-poetics, Eco-narratology, and Postcolonial Ecocriticism

The present study is situated at the intersection of eco-poetics, eco-narratology, and postcolonial ecocriticism, three interrelated but distinct critical formations that together provide a rigorous framework for examining how poetry responds to ecological crisis. While early ecocritical scholarship prioritised thematic representations of nature, contemporary developments in environmental literary studies have foregrounded the formal, linguistic, and narrative dimensions through which ecological meaning is constructed. This shift from thematic presence to aesthetic mediation is crucial for understanding how literary texts not only depict environmental degradation but also shape the epistemological and ethical conditions under which such degradation becomes perceptible.

Eco-poetics, in its broadest sense, concerns itself with the relationship between poetic language and the more-than-human world. It asks how form, rhythm, metaphor, voice, and sound pattern ecological consciousness rather than merely describe ecological phenomena. Rather than treating nature as an object external to discourse, eco-poetics examines how poetic structures themselves enact relationality, interdependence, and environmental vulnerability. Zapf's concept of literature as "cultural ecology" is particularly instructive here. Zapf argues that literary texts function as sites of imaginative regeneration within environmentally and culturally damaged systems, operating as both critical diagnostics and restorative counter-discourses (Zapf 3). In this view, poetry does not simply mirror ecological crisis; it reconfigures cultural perception through aesthetic innovation.

Eco-poetics thus moves beyond the assumption that environmental literature is defined by subject matter. Instead, it foregrounds how poetic devices such as metaphor, repetition, apostrophe, rhythm, and lyric subjectivity mediate ecological awareness. The lyric voice, for instance, can destabilise rigid distinctions between human and non-human domains by embedding the speaking self within landscapes of memory, loss, and interdependence. Similarly, patterns of recurrence and chant-like structures may evoke ecological cycles, seasonal rhythms, or communal ritual, thereby situating environmental crisis within broader cosmological and cultural frameworks. Eco-poetics therefore insists that form is

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not decorative but epistemological: it conditions how ecological realities are sensed, remembered, and ethically apprehended.

Complementing this focus on poetic form is eco-narratology, a field that examines how narrative structures shape environmental understanding. Emerging from narratological theory and environmental criticism, eco-narratology interrogates how perspective, focalisation, temporality, and world-making practices influence readers' perception of ecological relations. Erin James contends that narrative environments are constructed through cognitive and affective processes that position readers within particular ecological frames (James 62). Narrative is thus not a neutral container for environmental content; it actively organizes experience, determining whose voices are heard, how agency is distributed, and how ecological causality is rendered intelligible.

Eco-narratology is especially attentive to questions of voice and focalisation. Who speaks for the environment? Is the narrative perspective anthropocentric, communal, or more-than-human? How does temporality structure environmental crisis — as sudden catastrophe or as gradual, cumulative harm? Such questions are particularly pertinent to what Rob Nixon terms "slow violence," the incremental and often invisible environmental damage inflicted upon marginalised communities (Nixon 2). Narrative form becomes a means through which slow violence is made perceptible, whether through retrospective memory, cyclical temporality, or dialogic address. In poetic texts that adopt narrative inflections, the lyric and the narrative intersect, enabling what may be termed environmental storytelling: a mode in which ecological crisis unfolds as lived experience rather than abstract data.

While eco-poetics and eco-narratology provide crucial formal tools, their application to African literary contexts necessitates engagement with postcolonial ecocriticism. Postcolonial ecocriticism interrogates the entanglement of environmental degradation with histories of colonial extraction, capitalist expansion, and political marginalisation. It resists universalising ecological discourses that obscure uneven geographies of vulnerability and responsibility. As Nixon argues, environmental harm is frequently displaced onto the Global South, where extractive industries and resource exploitation generate long-term ecological trauma (Nixon 4). Literary texts emerging from such contexts often register environmental crisis not merely as planetary abstraction but as intimate, communal loss.

Postcolonial ecocriticism therefore complicates mainstream environmentalism by foregrounding environmental justice, resource politics, and the legacies of imperialism. It challenges the assumption that ecological crisis can be addressed through technocratic solutions alone, insisting instead upon the ethical, cultural, and narrative dimensions of environmental struggle. In this regard, literature from postcolonial spaces becomes indispensable to global environmental humanities discourse. It articulates ecological distress with specific histories of dispossession, thereby exposing the limitations of Euro-American paradigms that treat environmental crisis as a universally shared condition devoid of political asymmetry.

The convergence of eco-poetics, eco-narratology, and postcolonial ecocriticism enables a multidimensional reading strategy. Eco-poetics attends to the linguistic and rhythmic textures through which ecological relations are aestheticised. Eco-narratology analyses

how voice, perspective, and temporality structure environmental storytelling. Postcolonial ecocriticism situates these formal strategies within histories of extraction, marginalisation, and environmental injustice. Together, these frameworks resist reductive readings that isolate theme from form or aesthetics from politics.

Within the context of this study, such an integrated approach is particularly necessary. Poetry that emerges from ecologically threatened regions often mobilises oral traditions, communal memory, and call-and-response structures that blur the boundary between lyric song and narrative testimony. These aesthetic choices are not incidental; they constitute modes of ecological witnessing. By embedding environmental crisis within culturally resonant narrative and poetic forms, such texts render ecological harm ethically immediate and collectively intelligible. The lyric voice may function as witness, the river as archive, the tree as interlocutor, and the cosmos as dialogic space. Through these formal strategies, poetry becomes not merely representational but performative, enacting ecological interdependence at the level of discourse itself.

Ultimately, this theoretical framework positions literary form as central to the Humanities' engagement with global ecological distress. Eco-poetics reveals how language shapes environmental perception; eco-narratology demonstrates how storytelling organises ecological experience; and postcolonial ecocriticism ensures that such analyses remain attentive to histories of power and uneven vulnerability. In bringing these approaches into dialogue, the present study advances an understanding of poetry as environmental storytelling – an aesthetic practice that critiques ecological devastation while modeling alternative, relational modes of inhabiting the earth.

## **Eco-Poetic Witnessing and Riverine Narration in Ojaide's *Songs of Myself***

In *Songs of Myself*, Tanure Ojaide constructs the lyric voice not merely as a subjective presence but as an ecological archive shaped by riverine memory and oral cadence. The speaking "I" emerges as a custodian of landscape, bearing witness to environmental transformation through rhythm, repetition, and tonal inflection that recall indigenous song traditions. Rather than presenting nature as a distant object of contemplation, the poems embed memory within seasonal cycles, rainfall patterns, and aquatic abundance, thereby transforming lyric utterance into a site of ecological recall. This oral resonance situates the poetic voice within communal and environmental temporality, where remembrance becomes both testimony and subtle indictment in the face of ecological distress.

The poem "Gently" (14–15), the first in the collection, is structured as a sequence of chant-framed parables, each introduced and sealed by the Urhobo refrain "Dede-e dede-e," an onomatopoeic rendering of "gently." The repetition is not ornamental; it establishes an acoustic ecology in which sound patterns model ethical orientation. The refrain slows the tempo of reading, enacting the measured cadence it names. In eco-poetic terms, rhythm becomes epistemology: the poem teaches sustainability through sonic restraint. The chant form also recalls oral performances, situating ecological knowledge within communal transmission rather than abstract doctrine.

Dede-e-dede-e Gently and steadily the old man pulls the threads of the loom.

Dede-e-dede-e He limps his way through the rugged terrain that stretches before him but outpaces strides of those without age or other kinds of challenges.

Dede-e-dede-e The cotton tree stands unnoticed amidst iroko and palm trees but its soft sheets of fabric cover the entire world's nakedness.

Dede-e-dede-e It's not only years that confer wisdom, says the young crocodile that has dug its hole with tools of its mouth and satiated with fish.

Dede-e-dede-e Its not the hulk that gives one power, boasts the black ant after stabbing the elephant's butt and downing the giant of the jungle.

Dede-e-dede-e One's speed comes not just from a multiplicity of limbs, the two-legged mocks the millipede it always flashes past.

Dede-e-dede-e More than thrice, and accompanied by its kind, the cock crows at dawn but only once does the cheerful but taciturn sun rise to wake up the world.

Dede-e-dede-e I am not a priest but consecrated a temple on the mountain's top where I chant invocations and panegyrics to my benevolent muse.

Dede-e-dede-e Nor am I asking with the paraphernalia that weighs down the unwary but I am covered with songs assuaging every ache that afflicts the head.

Dede-e-dede-e Gently and steadily the old man pulls the thread of the loom. Dede-e-dede-e. (*Songs*, 14–15)

The opening stanza – "Gently and steadily the old man / pulls the thread of the loom" (*Songs*, 14) – introduces weaving as a governing metaphor. The loom figures interdependence: threads require patience to cohere into fabric. By juxtaposing the old man's limp with his ability to "outpace strides of those without age," the poem critiques modern acceleration and its extractive logic. Endurance, not speed, secures continuity. The rugged terrain further embeds the lyric voice within landscape, signalling that ecological labour unfolds within material constraints rather than idealised nature.

The cotton tree stanza extends this ethic of overlooked sustenance: though "unnoticed / amidst iroko and palm trees," its "soft sheets of fabric cover the entire / world's nakedness" (14). The poem recalibrates value by foregrounding the marginal. Focalisation shifts from the spectacular (iroko, palm tree) to the modest (cotton), redistributing attention across the vegetal community. Environmental insight emerges from re-seeing the ordinary.

Subsequent stanzas adopt a proverbial mode through animal exempla. The "young crocodile" who fashions tools with its mouth and the "black ant" that fells the elephant destabilise anthropocentric hierarchies and expose the fallacy of equating size with power (14). Each vignette functions as a micro-narrative of proportionality: capability arises from adaptation, not dominance. The millipede mocked by the "two-legged" and the cock whose repeated crowing contrasts with the sun's single, efficacious rising refine the poem's temporality. Cyclical recurrence (crow, dawn, refrain) coexists with decisive action

(sunrise), modeling a balance between persistence and sufficiency. Narrative sequencing accumulates ethical instruction without climactic rupture; crisis is addressed through calibrated wisdom rather than spectacle.

The penultimate movement repositions the speaker: "I am not a priest... Nor am I a king ... but I am covered with songs" (15). Authority is displaced from institutional power to lyric vocation. The self "consecrate[ing] a temple" through chant redefines poetry as ecological rite. By invoking mountain-top consecration and communal invocation, Ojaide frames poetic utterance as ethical stewardship.

Across its stanzas, "Gently" orchestrates a poetics of measuredness. The refrain's cyclical return mirrors seasonal continuity; the loom metaphor encodes interdependence; animal and vegetal agents redistribute narrative agency beyond the human. In the context of global ecological distress, the poem proposes an alternative to extractive modernity: a riverine-inflected ethic of patience, proportion, and attentive care. Through chant, proverb, and distributed focalisation, Ojaide transforms lyric into environmental storytelling, where sound and sequence cultivate a sustainable imagination.

In "Much of the Year Wet," Ojaide deepens his eco-poetic witnessing by transforming the mudfish into an emblem of ecological endurance within the Niger Delta's hydrological cycles. The poem refracts environmental precarity through narrative cadence, communal memory, and symbolic metamorphosis. Its descriptive surface — alternating between inundation and drought — conceals a postcolonial ecological allegory attentive to survival within extractive modernity.

Much of the year wet, it lives a regular life in royalty in the creeks, streams, and lakes; the mudfish floats with a retinue of family fins, and from its gestures must be partying.

Baits dropped by fishers fill the water but averts hook and net, going for plankton.

In the dry season often a castaway in dusty creeks ensconced in mud, a living miracle of drought, it settles down to live a recluse's life to survive.

Fish holed in low water-level earth, the rains will always come to free it from the dungeon of dust, not a grave but only a diversion to the fishermen.

In early hurricanes in the village we caught mudfish that we thought fell from the sky, and Grandma concurred to please us to make us grow and learn with age — with the Atlantic at the horizon and dry creeks staring, we looked over the fact!

It turned out to be the tastiest fish; no wonder it was compared to sex: the man making love with a woman seen as mudfish sliding into a cone-net!

Singular fish a monarch metamorphosed into, he possessed unfathomable power he exercised over nobles and commoners. The king of fish, none contests its primacy.

Should I choose to be fish in the next world, would I survive in the methane-filled streams? (*Songs*, 118–119)

The opening stanza situates existence within plenitude: "Much of the year wet, it lives a / regular life in royalty in the / creeks, streams, and lakes" (118). Wetness becomes ecological sovereignty. The mudfish inhabits "royalty," suggesting both abundance and indigenous order prior to disruption. The fish's "retinue / of family fins" evokes communal kinship, reinforcing an ecosystem structured by relational interdependence rather than domination. The lyric voice performs ecological memory, recalling a time when riverine life followed seasonal rhythms without toxic interference.

Yet the abundance coexists with threat. When "Baits dropped by fishers fill the / water," the fish "averts hook and net, going for plankton" (118). Here, agency is foregrounded. The mudfish resists capture, choosing sustenance over entrapment. This subtle act mirrors what postcolonial ecocriticism terms subaltern resilience — the capacity of marginalised ecologies and peoples to evade exploitative systems (Huggan and Tiffin 12). The fish's discernment encodes indigenous survival strategies in landscapes increasingly commodified.

The dry season marks a shift from plenitude to entombment: "a castaway in dusty creeks / ensconced in mud / a living miracle of drought" (118). The oxymoron "living miracle of drought" reframes deprivation as endurance. The mudfish's capacity to aestivate transforms apparent burial into latency — "not a / grave but only a diversion." Ojaide's riverine narration thus resists linear catastrophe; drought is not annihilation but suspension. The ecosystem itself becomes a temporal agent, structuring cycles of disappearance and return (James 56). The rains "will always come to free it," reaffirming ecological futurity embedded in memory.

The stanza recalling childhood — "In early hurricanes in the village / we caught mudfish" — introduces oral communal lore. Grandma's playful concurrence that fish "fell from the sky" reflects intergenerational pedagogy. Ecological knowledge emerges through mythic framing rather than scientific abstraction. This oral resonance situates the lyric within transcultural Englishes, where local cosmology inflects global language. The Atlantic horizon and "dry creeks staring" juxtapose expansiveness with depletion, subtly invoking the Delta's oil-driven transformations without didactic declaration.

The sensual comparison — "no wonder it was compared to sex" (119) — operates metaphorically rather than gratuitously. The mudfish "sliding into a cone-net" fuses vitality, appetite, and danger. The erotic analogy underscores the intensity of taste and desire, yet it also gestures toward entrapment. Pleasure coexists with risk, mirroring the Delta's paradox: resource wealth entangled with environmental violence.

The closing movement heightens allegory:

Singular fish a monarch metamorphosed into, he possessed unfathomable power ... Should I choose to be fish in the next world, would I survive in the methane-filled streams? (119)

Metamorphosis from fish to monarch universalises the symbol. The mudfish becomes sovereign survivor, yet the final rhetorical question disrupts confidence. "Methane-filled streams" signals petrochemical contamination. The lyric voice shifts from celebration of resilience to anxiety about ecological futurity. Survival strategies honed over centuries may falter before industrial toxicity.

Here, temporal movement is critical: the poem moves from cyclical time (wet/dry seasons) to a ruptured future in which the speaker can no longer assume ecological continuity. The shift from present-tense description to the conditional "would I survive" indexes a narratological break — the old story of seasonal return can no longer be told with confidence. "Much of the Year Wet" exemplifies eco-poetic witnessing as narrative testimony, affirming cyclical regeneration yet refusing naïve optimism.

In "Can I Still Call from the River Nun?", Ojaide radicalises eco-poetic narration by allowing the riverine landscape to function as interrogative consciousness. The poem is structured almost entirely as a chain of rhetorical questions, each beginning with the modal "can," thereby foregrounding uncertainty as the dominant ecological condition. This repetition does not merely dramatise lament; it stages the River Nun as narrative agent — a speaking geography whose voice bears witness to environmental devastation.

Can I still call from the River Nun to the sea maids lounging in the Atlantic to come to me  
for a party

can the river bird still be heard and summoned to perch and dance on the reed in the tide

can the legendary labyrinths of the Delta take the fisherman to work and back with songs

can the endangered iroko, mahogany, and others hold back the fire of the conglomerate of  
poachers

can the warthog, porcupine, deer, and dozens of game defend themselves against the army  
of developers

can the fish population fondly called children of the gods stop the poisoning of their  
resident water by oil workers

can the green leaves, grass, and teeming undergrowth shield themselves against the toxic  
flames of arsonists

can the air that sustains the living in this blessed portion insulate itself against vagabond  
flares of raging gas

can the soil under assault from fires set by money mongers find relief from its tormentors  
in corporate headquarters

can the rains, God's lavish draughts for needy folks, escape the black clouds of fumes  
blanketing the sky

can night, refuge after the day's toil, now in flames regain its dark shade and maintain its  
cool dominion

can residents of the divine gardens of plenitude survive perils of dollar lords at Abuja and  
abroad

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can the remnant population of the abused land still live meaningful lives after the death of companions?

Let those insulting defenders of their haunted homeland answer the questions posed by whom they call militants! (*Songs*, 114–115)

The opening invocation – "Can I still call from the River Nun / to the sea maids lounging in the Atlantic" (114) – situates the river within a cosmology of interconnected waters. The Niger Delta is imagined not as an isolated site but as part of a broader Atlantic ecology. The river becomes both origin and conduit, a communicative entity linking freshwater, oceanic myth, and communal ritual. Yet the question "Can I still call" signals rupture: communication itself is endangered.

As the poem progresses, Ojaide catalogues ecological losses: endangered trees, hunted wildlife, poisoned fish, toxic flames, gas flares, and scorched soil. Each interrogative line expands the radius of harm:

can the fish population fondly called children of the gods stop the poisoning of their resident water by oil workers (*Songs*, 114)

Here, the fish are not mere fauna but sacral beings – "children of the gods" – whose desecration signifies cosmological disorder. Ojaide sacralises biodiversity; he frames environmental destruction as narrative violence inflicted upon divine inhabitants. The river thus witnesses not only ecological depletion but spiritual violation.

The poem's syntax performs accumulation. The relentless sequence of "can" questions mimics the rising tide of grievance, turning the river into a juridical voice that interrogates petro-capital modernity. Corporate power is explicitly named in phrases such as "corporate headquarters" and "dollar lords at Abuja and abroad" (115). Through a postcolonial ecocritical lens, these references expose the transnational circuitry of extraction, linking local devastation to global capital. The river's testimony therefore transcends geography; it becomes an archive of neo-colonial ecological plunder.

Particularly striking is the image of night "now in flames" struggling to "regain its dark shade" (115). Darkness, traditionally associated with rest and refuge, is stripped of its restorative function by gas flaring. Temporal ecology itself is destabilised. Day and night – fundamental narrative markers – are disordered, suggesting that ecological crisis rewrites the grammar of time.

The concluding provocation – "Let those insulting defenders of their haunted homeland answer / the questions posed by whom / they call militants!" (115) – shifts the burden of response to human actors. The river's interrogations demand ethical accountability. In this way, Ojaide enacts what may be termed eco-poetic witnessing: the river speaks not metaphorically but judicially. It records, questions, and indicts.

By transforming the River Nun into a questioning narrator, Ojaide reconfigures landscape as subject rather than backdrop. The river does not merely flow through history; it narrates history. It does not merely suffer extraction; it testifies against it. In doing so, the poem insists that damaged waters still possess voice, memory, and moral authority.

In "The Zestful River Lost its Fine Fingers," Ojaide intensifies the logic of eco-poetic witnessing by rendering the riverine environment as a mutilated body whose injuries narrate the history of extractive violence. The opening repetition – "The zestful river lost its fine fingers" – establishes loss as both anatomical and cartographic. The "fingers" that once "pointed / ancestral wetlands" evoke tributaries functioning as mnemonic extensions, directing communal memory toward origin. Their severance signals not only ecological damage but epistemic rupture: the river can no longer guide its people to ancestral knowledge. The river's body becomes a narrative map whose amputation erases routes of belonging.

The zestful river lost its fine fingers that once pointed to ancestral wetlands to a sluice of oil-borne toxins seeping through the skin to dissolve membranes.

The forest that for long stood erect has its legs amputated by multinational poachers to post proud profits at the Stock Exchange; the refuge of green vandalized by intruders.

All the groves and beauty spots disfigured by constant exposure to acid showers.

You wouldn't know this was the primeval haven, this home whose residents drop from agonies – fishermen and other folks fell to Bell's seduction and now survive only on imported frozen fish!

The smooth body lacerated beyond recognition by gas flares and blowouts; the skin peels away.

The anthills marking the land sank into oblivion from perennial corrosion; the body damned crust.

The catfish wears no whiskers, as the mudfish misses its phallic head; both now alien in their home waters.

The homebred parrot no longer spokesman of birds, just as the burning sky rid the eagles of its majesty.

The eyes of the earth, blinded by convulsive fumes, no longer the sentinels that kept us safe at a distance; only one ear not two opening to all directions and so no more forewarns of advancing perils; the nose a mere facial protrusion and the tongue a labial outgrowth; no longer the household taster.

These mutations stuck with us, so inescapable; accursed fate of bartering one wealth for another. (*Songs*, 122–123)

The image of "oil-borne toxins / seeping through the skin to dissolve membranes" translates petrochemical pollution into corporeal violation. The diction of "skin" and "membranes" collapses distinctions between landscape and organism, framing the Delta as a living entity subjected to invasive penetration. This somatic metaphor intensifies when "The forest... has its legs amputated by multinational poachers / to post proud profits at the Stock Exchange." Here, environmental destruction is explicitly tethered to global capital. The forest's "amputation" parallels the river's mutilation, while the reference to the

"Stock Exchange" situates ecological harm within transnational circuits of profit. The poem exposes how neo-imperial economic structures reconfigure biodiverse habitats into commodities.

Ojaide's syntax accumulates disfigurements: "acid showers," "gas flares and blowouts," "anthills... sank into oblivion." Each clause adds a layer to what may be termed ecological dismemberment. The environment is not merely polluted; it is anatomically dismantled. Particularly striking is the catalogue of mutated creatures: "The catfish wears no whiskers," "the mudfish misses its phallic head," "The homebred parrot no longer spokesman of birds." These deformities suggest evolutionary distortion under toxic pressure. The river's fauna lose their defining features, becoming "alien in their home waters." Such imagery dramatises how environmental degradation destabilises identity itself — biological, cultural, and symbolic.

The poem then extends bodily metaphor to sensory collapse: "The eyes of the earth, blinded by convulsive fumes," and "only one ear not two opening to all directions." The landscape is deprived of perception; it can no longer see, hear, taste, or forewarn. This sensory paralysis underscores the poem's concern with the river as witness. If the river once functioned as sentinel — "the sentinels that kept us safe" — its blinding and deafening signify the silencing of ecological testimony. Yet paradoxically, the poem itself restores that testimony through language. The act of narration compensates for environmental mutilation, transforming poetic speech into ethical resistance.

The concluding line — "accursed fate of bartering one wealth for another" — encapsulates the tragic economy underpinning the devastation. Petroleum wealth supplants ecological wealth; profit displaces plenitude. Ojaide exposes the false equivalence embedded in developmental rhetoric. The "zestful river" is not simply diminished but fundamentally altered, its vitality exchanged for toxic affluence.

The river in *Songs of Myself* is both narrative agent and historical archive. It speaks through its wounds. Its amputations recount the story of multinational extraction; its mutations testify to petro-modernity's violence. By embodying ecological crisis in somatic imagery, Ojaide mobilises lyric narration as environmental ethics, aligning literary form with the urgent call for interdisciplinary ecological reassessment envisioned in environmental humanities.

## Environmental Storytelling and Ethical Address in Osundare's *Green: Sighs of Our Ailing Planet*

In *Green: Sighs of Our Ailing Planet*, Niyi Osundare shifts eco-poetic focus from regional testimony to planetary crisis, framing environmental degradation as a global narrative demanding ethical response. The collection transforms climate instability, ecological loss, and atmospheric violence into urgent acts of storytelling that summon moral reflection. Osundare's poetry demonstrates how lyric form becomes ethical address. It is against this backdrop of planetary imbalance that "Climate of Fear" opens the discourse, articulating climate change as both lived reality and unfolding narrative catastrophe.

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The rains come too late these days and leave before their time withering fields foretell the coming of furious famines

Spring swallows summer summer stumbles into a sweltering fall while winter joins the fray with snowy deluge and blinding ice

Unstoppable fires consume the skies from Kangaroo Island to paradise

Pause A melting Arctic chokes the oceans just one wittling whistle from the catacombs of coral reefs bleached and buffered by a plague of acid and plastic debris

Once-in-a-century hurricanes proliferate into ten-in-a-year while countless typhoons pummel the peace of once Pacific regions

Birds are falling from the sky lizards roasting on their rocky perch

Out of balance, out of breadth our Planet gasps and groans as murky moons wobble their way across the wilderness of a broken sky...

Pause The earth we used to know is once-upon-a-time. (*Green*, 30)

Osundare constructs environmental crisis as planetary narrative rupture, transforming climate change into a story of temporal dislocation, ecological imbalance, and ethical emergency. Unlike Ojaide's riverine testimony rooted in regional geography, Osundare widens the scale to a global cartography of distress. The poem opens with seasonal disorder: "The rains come / too late these days / and leave before their time" (30). Temporal markers such as rain, spring, summer, and winter no longer obey ecological rhythm. The predictable cycle that once structured agrarian and communal life fractures into instability. Through this reconfiguration of time, Osundare enacts eco-narratology at the level of seasonality: climate becomes plot.

The phrase "withering fields foretell / the coming of furious famines" (30) introduces prophetic diction. Environmental storytelling here assumes the tone of warning rather than recollection. The alliteration "furious famines" intensifies urgency, while "foretell" situates the poem within a tradition of poetic foresight. The humanities, Osundare suggests, are not passive observers but anticipatory voices capable of reading ecological signs.

Global interconnection emerges vividly in the line "Unstoppable fires consume the skies / from Kangaroo Island to paradise" (30). The reference to Kangaroo Island invokes the devastating Australian bushfires of 2019–2020, while "paradise" likely alludes to the California town of Paradise destroyed by the 2018 Camp Fire. Together, these references transform local catastrophe into planetary symptoms. Osundare's geography is transcontinental; crisis ignores borders.

The poem's staged "Pause" functions structurally as breathlessness — a textual gasp mirroring the line "our Planet gasps and groans" (30). This anthropomorphic rendering of Earth intensifies ethical address. The planet is not an inert sphere but a suffering body. Osundare mobilises personification to provoke moral response. The planet becomes

protagonist of a narrative whose trajectory is tragic – yet the poem's very act of telling implies that the story might still be redirected.

Marine devastation deepens the catastrophe: "A melting Arctic chokes the oceans" (30). The Arctic, an emblem of climatic stability, now suffocates its own waters. Coral reefs are described as emerging from "catacombs," bleached by "acid and plastic debris" (30). The lexicon of burial ("catacombs") casts marine ecosystems as entombed civilisations. Environmental storytelling converges with elegy: the sea narrates extinction.

Extreme weather multiplies: "Once-in-a-century hurricanes / proliferate into ten-in-a-year" (30). Statistical distortion replaces natural rhythm. The poem exposes how exceptional events become routine – a narratological shift from anomaly to norm. Meanwhile, images such as "Birds are falling from the sky / lizards roasting on their rocky perch" (30) dramatise ecological collapse through stark visual compression. Fauna become casualties in a destabilised atmosphere.

The culminating declaration, "The earth we used to know / is once-upon-a-time" (30), is profoundly narratological. The phrase "once-upon-a-time" belongs to fairy-tale conventions, signalling irretrievable pastness. By casting the former Earth as a storybook memory, Osundare suggests that ecological stability has entered myth. Environmental crisis thus rewrites the narrative of modernity itself.

"Climate of Fear" exemplifies environmental storytelling as ethical summons. The poem does not merely depict catastrophe; it structures it as unfolding narrative that demands human accountability. Through rhythm, image, and global mapping, poetry becomes ecological conscience, articulating a world where fear is climate, and climate is fate unless re-narrated through responsible action.

Building on the planetary anxiety articulated in "Climate of Fear," Osundare's "Eco Hints" intensifies the collection's ethical thrust by shifting from climatic narration to direct moral interrogation. Where the former maps global ecological disorder through temporal and spatial dislocations, this poem adopts a dialogic and interrogative mode that implicates the reader more explicitly. Structured as a sequence of probing questions and stark observations, "Eco Hints" transforms environmental storytelling into ethical address, compelling a response rather than passive contemplation.

The poem opens with a disturbing auditory image:

When last did you Hear a river cry From the lethal pain of arsenic poisoning. (*Green*, 59)

Osundare extends eco-poetic personification into visceral territory. The river "cries," not metaphorically but as a suffering organism subjected to "arsenic poisoning." This aligns with eco-poetic strategies that collapse the divide between human and non-human bodies, rendering environmental harm as corporeal injury. The phrase "lethal pain" intensifies this embodiment, suggesting that ecological degradation is both sensory and terminal. The river functions as a speaking subject whose voice has been historically ignored. The question "When last did you hear" indicts human deafness, foregrounding ethical failure as perceptual neglect.

The subsequent transformation of the "favourite lake" from "blue to purple / Then to frightening red" (59) employs chromatic progression as narrative device. Colour becomes a diagnostic code: blue signifies ecological health, while purple and red index contamination and danger. The gradual shift mimics narrative escalation, turning environmental change into a visual story of deterioration. Osundare's diction — particularly "frightening red" — introduces affect, ensuring that ecological data is not neutral but emotionally charged.

The poem continues its interrogative structure:

When last did you Sigh at the swansong of a falling tree And the empty agony of shadeless terrains. (*Green*, 59)

The phrase "swansong of a falling tree" fuses ecological loss with elegiac tradition. The tree's fall is not merely physical but musical, a final performance before extinction. This resonates with Zapf's notion of literature as "cultural ecology," where texts register environmental crisis through symbolic and aesthetic mediation (Zapf 3). The "shadeless terrains" that follow signify not only deforestation but the erasure of shelter, community, and ecological balance. The poem moves from individual loss to systemic devastation.

Osundare then reconfigures natural elements into agents of violence: "The rain, these days / Is fire from the sky" (*Green*, 59). This inversion of rain from life-giving to destructive echoes the temporal dislocations observed in "Climate of Fear." The rain's "rage" is felt by "the roof" and "the earth," suggesting that both human habitation and natural ground are equally vulnerable. The focalisation here is deliberately unstable — the "you" addressed is simultaneously the individual reader and the collective "we" of petro-modernity.

Global interconnection is foregrounded in the lines:

A tree falls in Congo's forest An iceberg crashes In the distant Antarctic Dreadful chain of our dying Planet. (*Green*, 59)

The reference to the Congo Basin and the Antarctic establishes a planetary continuum. Environmental events are not isolated; they form a "dreadful chain." This reflects a systems-based understanding of ecology aligned with contemporary environmental humanities discourse. The poem's rhetorical structure underscores collective responsibility, suggesting that distant catastrophes are linked to shared human actions.

Marine degradation further amplifies the crisis:

The oceans choke on plastic A mercury plague un-schools the shoals. (*Green*, 59)

The verb "choke" conveys suffocation, while "mercury plague" evokes disease. The phrase "un-schools the shoals" is particularly striking, as it disrupts the natural formation of fish communities. This linguistic innovation exemplifies eco-poetic creativity, where language itself is reshaped to capture ecological disruption. The breakdown of "schools" signifies both biological and social disintegration, reinforcing the theme of systemic collapse.

The final indictment, "There is a glazing hole in the sky / Unseen by the Blind-in-power" (*Green*, 59), targets political negligence. The pun on "blind-in-power" exposes willful

ignorance among those in authority. This aligns with postcolonial ecocritical concerns about governance, accountability, and the uneven distribution of environmental harm. The "hole in the sky" recalls ozone depletion, a global crisis exacerbated by industrial practices, thereby linking local suffering to global policy failure.

"Eco Hints" advances environmental storytelling as ethical pedagogy. Its interrogative structure transforms the reader into participant, demanding recognition and response.

Following the global alarm sounded in "Climate of Fear" and the ethical interrogation advanced in "Eco Hints," Osundare's "Deep Green (Once Upon a Forest)" turns inward to a more reflective, elegiac mode, where environmental storytelling is grounded in memory, loss, and the fragmentation of human-nature dialogue. While the earlier poems map planetary instability and demand moral accountability, "Deep Green" mourns the disappearance of ecological intimacy, presenting deforestation as both material devastation and epistemic rupture. In doing so, the poem deepens the collection's ethical address by foregrounding what has been lost – not only ecosystems but modes of knowing and relating to the natural world.

The opening line, "Deep green, my testament, as I forage / through this forest of vanished glories" (*Green*, 26), immediately frames the poem as both personal archive and ecological elegy. The phrase "my testament" signals witness-bearing, aligning the speaker with the broader eco-poetic function of recording environmental change. Yet this testimony is mediated through absence: the forest is one "of vanished glories." The act of "foraging" suggests both survival and searching, as the speaker navigates remnants rather than plenitude. The poem situates itself within a retrospective temporality, where the present is haunted by a more vibrant ecological past.

This sense of depletion is intensified through corporeal imagery:

Roots have shriveled in earth's heat-harassed crypt  
blighted leaves float in the wind like flakes from careless scars. (*Green*, 26)

Here, the earth is rendered as a "crypt," a space of burial, suggesting that ecological life has been entombed rather than sustained. The alliterative phrase "heat-harassed" conveys climatic stress, echoing the disruptions noted in "Climate of Fear." The simile comparing leaves to "flakes from careless scars" transforms deforestation into bodily injury, reinforcing eco-poetic strategies that collapse distinctions between human and environmental suffering. The adjective "careless" introduces ethical critique, implying that damage is not accidental but the result of neglect and exploitation.

The line "Long-limbed lumbermen have / laid low the loins of the land" (*Green*, 26) intensifies this critique through sexualised metaphor. The "loins of the land" evoke fertility and generative capacity, while their subjugation suggests violation. The lumbermen, described as "long-limbed," appear almost grotesquely extended, embodying the overreach of extractive capitalism. This imagery resonates with postcolonial ecocritical concerns about resource exploitation, where natural wealth is systematically stripped for profit. The departure of the "Yes-I birds with their rainbow songs" further underscores ecological and aesthetic loss. Their absence signifies not only biodiversity decline but the

silencing of environmental music – a motif that contrasts sharply with the oral and dialogic richness observed in Ojaide's riverine poetics.

The poem's most striking ecological metaphor appears in the lines:

The desert marches towards the sea, a haughty, implacable army... (*Green*, 26)

Desertification is personified as militarised invasion. The "march" suggests inevitability, while "haughty" and "implacable" convey arrogance and relentlessness. Environmental change becomes narrative conflict, where the desert assumes the role of antagonist. This image extends the planetary scale introduced in "Climate of Fear," linking local deforestation to broader processes of climatic transformation.

The temporal pivot, "Once (not too long ago)," introduces a shift from present devastation to remembered intimacy:

I talked to trees in this forest and trees talked back to me. (*Green*, 26)

This reciprocal dialogue encapsulates an ecological epistemology grounded in relationality. The speaker's ability to "talk" with trees suggests a prelapsarian harmony in which human and non-human voices were mutually intelligible. This moment affirms the possibility of communicative coexistence; it marks a lost narrative mode in which nature participated actively in storytelling. The parenthetical "not too long ago" intensifies the tragedy, indicating that this rupture is recent and therefore preventable.

The closing repetition, "Deep green," functions as both refrain and lament. It echoes the title while signaling the depth of loss. Green, traditionally associated with vitality and renewal, is here rendered spectral – an absent presence invoked through memory. This aligns with Zapf's conception of literature as cultural ecology, where texts preserve and regenerate endangered relationships through imaginative reconstruction (Zapf 3). The poem thus operates as both elegy and archive, preserving the memory of ecological harmony even as it documents its erosion.

If "Climate of Fear" narrates global crisis and "Eco Hints" demands ethical response, "Deep Green" articulates the emotional and cultural cost of ecological loss. It demonstrates that environmental degradation is not only a scientific or economic issue but a profound disruption of human identity and memory. Through its elegiac tone, corporeal imagery, and narrative of lost dialogue, "Deep Green" reinforces the central argument of this study: that eco-poetic language and environmental storytelling are indispensable to reimagining human-nature relations in an era of planetary crisis.

## **The Humanities and the Sustainable Development Goals**

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 13 (Climate Action), Goal 14 (Life Below Water), and Goal 15 (Life on Land), provide measurable targets for sustainability. Yet they often rely on scientific data and economic metrics that risk abstracting ecological crisis from lived experience. Within this gap, the humanities – and the eco-poetic and eco-narratological interventions examined here – assume critical

importance. Ojaide and Osundare translate environmental degradation into ethical consciousness, complementing quantitative frameworks with qualitative depth.

The poetry analysed in this study aligns with the SDGs' emphasis on sustainability by foregrounding interdependence, responsibility, and the consequences of ecological neglect. Through lyric intensity and narrative structuring, these poets render visible the human and non-human costs of environmental exploitation, particularly within postcolonial contexts where ecological burdens are unevenly distributed. Such representations resonate with the SDGs' commitment to justice and inclusivity, underscoring the need to integrate local knowledge systems into global environmental strategies.

Moreover, literary texts cultivate the sensibility required to sustain action on the SDGs in ways that policy documents alone cannot. As Zapf contends, literature operates as a form of cultural ecology, mediating between imagination and environmental reality and enabling deeper engagement with ecological crisis (Zapf 3). The poetry examined here not only depicts environmental distress but shapes interpretive frameworks through which such distress is understood and addressed. This is especially significant in the digital age, where environmental information circulates rapidly yet often lacks emotional resonance. The affective and narrative dimensions of poetry encourage readers to perceive environmental issues as immediate and relational rather than distant abstractions.

Importantly, African eco-poetry, as exemplified by Ojaide and Osundare, expands the epistemological scope of the SDGs by challenging Eurocentric assumptions embedded in global environmental discourse. Their works foreground indigenous ecological knowledge, oral traditions, and postcolonial realities, offering alternative models of sustainability rooted in cultural specificity. This intervention highlights the necessity of pluralising the humanities' contribution to the SDGs, ensuring that diverse voices inform the global pursuit of ecological balance.

## **Conclusion**

### **Singing the Earth in a Time of Crisis**

This paper has argued that eco-poetics and eco-narratology converge productively in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide and Niyi Osundare, where lyric becomes a vehicle for environmental storytelling and ethical address. Moving from riverine witnessing to planetary lament, the study has demonstrated how poetic language does not merely represent ecological crisis but actively structures it as narrative, memory, and moral inquiry. In this convergence, the lyric exceeds its conventional bounds, generating a mode through which environmental realities are rendered intelligible, affective, and ethically charged.

Central to this intervention is the recognition that literary form is not incidental but constitutive of ecological meaning. Rhythm, repetition, imagery, and voice function as mediating devices that translate environmental degradation into experiential knowledge. Through these formal strategies, poetry articulates relationships between human and non-human worlds in ways that resist reduction to data or policy. The river that speaks, the

forest that remembers, and the planet that gasps are not mere metaphors; they are narrative agents that compel a reorientation of perception and responsibility. Literary form becomes an ecological method — one that reveals the entanglements of life, loss, and survival within a shared environment.

The ethical implications of this poetics are profound. By foregrounding relationality and interdependence, the poems examined in this paper challenge anthropocentric paradigms that have historically underpinned environmental exploitation. They invite readers to inhabit a more expansive ontology in which human existence is inseparable from the vitality of rivers, forests, and atmospheric systems. Such a perspective is indispensable in an era marked by global ecological distress, where sustainable futures depend not only on technological innovation but also on shifts in cultural imagination and ethical orientation.

Within the global humanities, Nigerian and African poetry emerges here as a critical site of theoretical production rather than peripheral illustration. The works of Ojaide and Osundare contribute distinctive epistemologies grounded in oral traditions, postcolonial experience, and indigenous ecological knowledge. By articulating environmental crisis through these lenses, they challenge Eurocentric frameworks that have often dominated ecological discourse, thereby expanding the scope and inclusivity of global scholarship. Their poetry insists that any meaningful engagement with ecological futures must attend to diverse voices and contexts, particularly those situated in regions disproportionately affected by environmental degradation.

In a time when ecological crisis is both immediate and escalating, the humanities must continue to assert their relevance as spaces of critical reflection and imaginative possibility. Poetry, in particular, offers a mode of engagement that bridges cognition and emotion, analysis and empathy. It enables a rethinking of human-nature relations that is not only intellectually rigorous but also ethically transformative. As this study has shown, to sing the earth in times of crisis is not an act of escapism but one of resistance and renewal.

Looking forward, the role of the humanities in shaping ecological futures will depend on their ability to sustain such engagements — bringing together form, ethics, and narrative in ways that foster deeper understanding and collective responsibility. In this task, literature remains indispensable: a medium through which the Earth continues to speak, and through which humanity might yet learn to listen.

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